SARAH MACNAUGHTAN

PETER AND JANE; OR, THE MISSING HEIR

Sarah Macnaughtan

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

Mrs. Ogilvie, red-haired according to the exact shade then in fashion, and dressed by Paquin, sat in her drawing-room reading the *Court Journal*. She was a woman who thought on the lines of Aristotle, despised most other women except Charlotte Corday, Judith, Joan of Arc, and a few more, and she dyed her hair and read the *Court Journal*. People who did not know her sometimes alluded to her as an overdressed woman with a wig. Those who had met her even but once admitted the power of her personality. Perhaps if any one had known her very well he or she would have been bewildered by the many-sided complexities of her character, and would have failed to discover any sort of unity behind its surprising differences. But then, as a matter of fact, no one did know her well.

Those who cared to remember such an old story used to tell how, as a girl of eighteen, she had been deeply in love with a cousin of hers, Greville Monsen by name, and how almost on the eve of her marriage she had thrown him over and had married Colonel Ogilvie the explorer, a man twenty years older than herself, with an enormous fortune, and accounted something of a hero at the time.

Colonel Ogilvie married late in life, and his brother's wife had long ago decided that it would be better if he should never marry at all. Mrs. Lionel Ogilvie was an ambitious woman with a fine family of sons and daughters to whom Colonel Ogilvie's large estates and immense fortune would have been wholly appropriate. She had always been civil to her brother-in-law, although the estates and the money were entailed upon his brother, and she weighed in the balance the disinterested affection which she showed him against her feeling of satisfaction in the fact that he was a daring and indefatigable traveller; one, moreover, who was seldom quite happy unless he was in danger, and who never thoroughly enjoyed a journey if any other white man had trodden the ground before he himself visited it.

Mrs. Lionel Ogilvie was indignant at the news of Colonel Ogilvie's marriage. Being a very wise woman she would probably in time have controlled her temper, and by a little judicious management she might have secured a considerable fortune for herself and her children. But, alas! there was a necessity within her of exploding to some one when, as in this instance, her heart was hot and her head not quite cool. And so, with some sense of justice, venting her spleen upon the cause of it, Mrs. Lionel Ogilvie said certain very unwise and unkind things about her brother-in-law's fiancée and her cousin, Greville Monsen. Of course the heated and uncontrolled words of the disappointed woman were repeated, and there was a terrible and stormy interview between the two brothers, who parted that same day and never spoke to each other again.

Mrs. Francis Ogilvie bore the character of being a cold and dispassionate woman. And this was the more remarkable because on the distaff-side she was of Spanish descent, and might reasonably have been supposed to have inherited the instincts of that passionate and hot-tempered nation. She never quarrelled as the brothers had done, but her eyes narrowed for an instant with a trick that was characteristic of her when she heard Mrs. Lionel Ogilvie's tale. And when, in the quieter moments that followed her husband's outburst of anger, he asked her with a tone of question in his voice whether Lionel and that odious wife of his could possibly expect to be forgiven, Mrs. Ogilvie raised her eyebrows and said simply, 'I do not know what forgiveness means.' She paid no attention to the vulgar gossip which her sister-in-law tried to attach to her name, and Greville Monsen had either got over his disappointment, or was sufficiently attached to his former fiancée to forgive her her treatment of him. He came to the house on terms of intimate friendship, and continued to do so even after Mrs. Lionel Ogilvie's busy tongue had spoken.

Mrs. Ogilvie was not affected by gossip, nor moved by public opinion. To have altered her conduct, even by a hair's-breadth, because it was not generally approved would have seemed to her an absurdity; but those who offended her were not given the opportunity of doing so twice. To have had small quarrels followed by reconciliations would have been impossible to her. Very few things were worth quarrelling about at all, still fewer worth forgiving! Mrs. Ogilvie was cynically indifferent to transgressions against herself; but when she sat in judgment she always gave a life-sentence.

When Lionel died the feud between the brothers would probably have been forgotten had it not been for the lamentable fact that his eldest son, who had grown up into a faithful likeness of his worldly and commonplace mother, took it into his head at the time of his father's death to write to his uncle in a way which showed as much greed as ill-breeding. The foolish young man's letter might have been put into the fire and forgotten, for Colonel Ogilvie had loved his brother long ago, and his death affected him deeply; but young Lionel made a mistake when he referred to the fact that Colonel and Mrs. Ogilvie were childless, and alluded to his own prospects. This put an end for ever to all friendly intercourse between the uncle and nephew; Mrs. Ogilvie, on her part, lifted her eyebrows again and said, 'The commercial mind is very droll!' But just for one moment she locked her hands together with an impulsive movement that had a whole life's tragedy and disappointment in it.

It meant all the world to her and her husband that they should have children. But Fate, who had prospered them in every other respect, had denied them what they most desired. A son and heir, who was born a year after the marriage, had died the same day. Two years later a little girl was born who lived a few weeks, and then she also died. Since then there had been no children. Many women would have claimed sympathy for their sorrow, most women would at least have accepted it. Mrs. Ogilvie, with her health somewhat impaired, came back to the world and assumed her place in it without any expressions of regret for her disappointment. Probably not even her husband knew whether she felt her loss deeply or not. No one else was ever permitted to speak of it. Colonel Ogilvie's own disappointment was never expressed. He had too much tenderness for his wife to say anything about it.

'If ever I am to be a mother again,' Mrs. Ogilvie said once, 'my child shall be born out of reach of kind inquiries or deep sympathy. If he lives, let those rejoice with me who will. But pity is always offensive, and is generally meant to be so.'

As the years came and went Colonel Ogilvie lost interest in his property, and handed over the care of the greater part of it to agents and stewards, and came very near to hating the lands which some day would go to his nephew. A queer restlessness was upon him, and his wife watched him and said nothing; until one day, seeing him reading a certain paragraph in a newspaper, she said to him, smiling slightly, as they stood together on the broad stone terrace at Bowshott, 'Why don't you go with them on this exploring expedition?'

Colonel Ogilvie protested. He was a married man, he said, and his travelling days were over. It is probable, however, that never was a suggestion more welcome. The past years, in spite of his deep love for his wife, had been full of fret and shadowed by disappointment, and he longed, with a traveller's intensity of longing, for the wild untroubled places of the world, the primitive life, and if possible some dangers on the road. An exploring party sent out by the British Government to discover a lost missionary and to punish a warlike tribe was exactly the thing to suit his adventurous disposition. In spirit he was already in the dangerous places of Central Africa, far from human habitation, and with very often his own right hand the sole thing between him and a barbarous death. Even while he protested with conscientious emphasis against his wife's proposal, he already saw the dim forests of Africa, the line of bearers on the difficult march, the tents struck at nightfall, and all the paraphernalia of an interesting campaign.

He was away for eighteen months, beyond the reach of letters and telegrams for the greater part of the time; and during his absence Mrs. Ogilvie, whose health for some months had been feeble, went to her native land of Spain for warmth and sunshine, travelling by sea to Lisbon for the sake of the voyage. From her Spanish mother she had inherited a property at Granada, and it was from there

that she was able to write and tell her husband that she was the mother of a son. Colonel Ogilvie was in an inaccessible region when that event happened, and it was not until he was on his return journey home that he heard the good news. Two years later another child, Peter, was born; and, ardently as her firstborn had been desired, Mrs. Ogilvie showered by far the greater part of her affection upon the younger child. Everything had to give way to Peter, and she resented that even such baby privileges as a child of tender years can receive were bestowed upon the elder son and heir. Her health gave cause for anxiety for some time after Peter was born, and her mental state and the condition of her nerves accounted for the partiality which she showed for her younger child.

The colonel, however, was always a little jealous for the fair-haired boy who had come to his mother while he was far away; and by his will, which he made at this time, he secured an almost extravagant provision for Edward. He could well-nigh forgive his nephews now for their obtrusive existence in the world, and he settled down to enjoy his property with the happy knowledge that he had two fine sturdy boys to whom to leave it. He was still in the prime of life, and not all the dangers and privations which he had suffered seemed to have undermined his splendid constitution. But a drive home in an open dogcart, after; speaking in an overheated hall at a political meeting, brought on a chill and pneumonia of which very suddenly he died. His loss was sincerely and deeply regretted in a neighbourhood where he was both admired and loved for his many good qualities, and a monument in Culversham parish church tells of his excellence as a landlord and his intrepid courage as an explorer.

Mrs. Ogilvie's health being still precarious, she went abroad for the winter after her husband's death to look into some matters concerning her own property, and to try to court health in the sunny vine-growing country. And there, in a little remote Spanish village by the sea which she loved to visit, little Edward Ogilvie, the elder of the two children, died; and not until six years later did Mrs. Ogilvie return to England. To all outward seeming she was as emotionless and reserved as she had ever been, and she spoke no word of her double sorrow and her irreparable loss. Her love for her remaining child never showed itself in caresses, and was not even discernible in her speech; but in spite of her reserve there was an undefined feeling in most people's minds that Mrs. Ogilvie idolized her son. Of the two who were dead no one ever heard her speak. Whatever she thought of them seemed to be buried in her heart as deeply as though that heart had been their graves. And there remained only cheery, popular Peter Ogilvie, with his mind as open as the day, and not a secret upon his soul, and with as much reserve as a schoolboy, to inherit the fortune which a prince might have envied, and a property which was unique in a county rich in beautiful houses.

The gardens of Bowshott were the admiration of the countryside, and Mrs. Ogilvie rarely entered them. The picture gallery was visited by foreigners from every part of the world. Mrs. Ogilvie frequently showed the works of the great masters herself, strolling along the polished floor of the gallery, and telling the story of this picture and that with the inimitable grace of manner which was vaguely resented by her country neighbours, delighting the distinguished foreigners who came to see the pictures. She herself hardly ever glanced at the old masters for her own pleasure; although full of technical knowledge on the subject she had no love of art. It used to weary her when she had to listen to enthusiasm, generally only half-sincere, about her Botticellis or her Raphaels. Music never stirred her, and she regarded the society of the country neighbourhood where she lived with a sense of uncomprehension which she sometimes found difficult to conceal.

'Why were such people born?' she used to say to herself at the sight of some rural gathering. On the rare occasions when she went to a party she was always the first to leave; boredom seemed to overtake her before she had been anywhere very long. Entertainments, so-called, were horribly wearisome to her, and she never for an instant believed those people who professed to have enjoyed a pleasant party. Parties were all stupid, she thought; just as most people were stupid, and most food was badly cooked. Therefore, why meet in somebody else's most probably hideous room, and eat impossible dishes and talk to impossible people? Her own chef had been famous even in Paris, and

every evening, according to the custom of the house, an extravagant *menu* was prepared, at which, when she was alone, she hardly glanced.

Mrs. Ogilvie discussed all things in heaven or earth with a baffling lightness, turned philosophy into a witty jest and made a sort of slang of classical terminology. Amongst a clever set in London she reigned supreme when she chose; but a false note or a pose offended her immediately, and the poseur or the insincere person would generally receive one of her exquisite snubs which cut like acid into tender skins. The pretentiousness of the so-called cultured set was a vulgarism in the eyes of this woman who could be rude with the air of a princess, and could give a snub as some people offer a compliment. Inferior persons sometimes wondered how she had a friend left. To be popular, they argued, one had to be civil, whereas Mrs. Ogilvie was often daringly disagreeable. There was indeed something almost fine in her splendid disdain of the civility of the so-called popular person. She could wound; but she did it with the grace of a duellist of old days, who wiped his rapier with a handkerchief of cambric and lace when he had killed his opponent, and would probably expect a man to die as he himself would die, with a jest on his lips and a light laugh at the flowing blood. Mrs. Ogilvie slew exquisitely, and she never hated her opponent. She smiled at enthusiasm and thought it bizarre and rather delightful; but towards vulgarity, especially in its pompous form, she presented her poniard-point sharply tipped and deadly. 'Why should people take themselves seriously?' she would say, with a shrug of her shoulders. 'Surely, we are a common enough species!' And then the green-grey eyes would narrow themselves in their shortsighted way, and Mrs. Ogilvie's voice, charmingly refined and well-bred, would with a few words lightly prick the falsely sentimental and self-inflated wind-bag of oratory that had presented its unprotected surface to her shaft.

Towards religion her attitude was the well-bred one. She took off her hat to it, as a gentleman removes his hat in church whatever his creed may be. Her own beliefs were as daring and as nearly as possible uninfluenced by outward opinion or by the accepted systems as it is possible for a creed to be. She never tried to force them upon any one else; possibly she did not believe in them herself sufficiently to wish to do so; but like her queer gowns and her dyed red hair her creed suited Mrs. Ogilvie. There was a congruous incongruity about her which set many people puzzling to find out her real character. Pompous persons and snobs detested her. Stupid or vapid people saw nothing in her, or saw merely that she dyed her hair and was dressed by Paquin. Narrow-minded people disapproved of her, and clever people considered her one of the most striking, if not one of the most agreeable personalities of the day. Women hardly ever understood her; but they respected any one who dressed as well as she did, and they had an undeclared admiration for a woman who could hold so lightly possessions which they believed to be all-important, and which Mrs. Ogilvie seemed to find so trivial.

The house and its gardens were open once a week to visitors, and the country neighbours brought their guests and strangers to see it, their pleasure in showing off Mrs. Ogilvie's possessions being somewhat tempered by timidity; while those who came to pay a call on the chance of finding her at home would sometimes say with an air of courage and independence to a friend, 'Mrs. Ogilvie is considered rather alarming, you know, but it really is only her manner.' She played her part as country neighbour conscientiously. Once a year she gave a sumptuous garden-party, all other garden-parties in the neighbourhood being dated by it. And when Peter was a little boy there were children asked to the house to play games with him, and later there were dances and balls.

Peter accepted his mother, his property, and his position on what he himself would probably have called their most cheery side. He valued Bowshott because there was excellent hunting to be got there; just as he loved his place in Scotland because of the stalking and the fishing and the shooting, but that they were magnificent or enviable never entered his head. Fate had dealt very kindly with him, and its kindliness had provoked a charming geniality in the character of the young man whom it had treated with such lavish good fortune. Taking it all round, Peter considered this world an excellent one, and most of the people in it very good sorts indeed. He accepted his mother as he accepted everything else, with a simple-heartedness which never looked below the surface nor concerned itself

with motives; and if any one had suggested to him that she was inexplicable he would have considered such a judgment quite unintelligible. He enjoyed a visit to her more than almost anything else in the world. She had always been devoted to him ever since he was a boy, and for the life of him he could not see that she was difficult to understand.

It was the fashion to say that Mrs. Ogilvie had altered greatly since the death of Colonel Ogilvie and the little boy. People who remembered all the circumstances of that sad time thought always that in her own way Mrs. Ogilvie was the victim of remorse for not having loved her dead child better. But, after all, there was nothing that a child of three or four years old could have felt seriously in his mother's conduct, and his father's affection must have consoled him for any coldness on her part. After the colonel's death there were those who said it would have been better if Mrs. Ogilvie had married again, or even if she had had a daughter—some one who would have been always at home, and who, to use the common phrase, might have taken Mrs. Ogilvie out of herself. Peter was too much away from home to be a real companion to his mother, and there were never guests at Bowshott unless he was there. It would surely have been in reason if the widow had taken a fancy to some nice girl and had had her to live in the house. But Mrs. Ogilvie did not take fancies to nice girls. She loved Jane Erskine, but disguised the feeling under a sort of whimsical indifference. And the friendship seemed incongruous enough if one came to think of it. Jane, with her wholesome love of outdoor life, her fresh beauty, her heedlessness of learning and ignorance of books—what had Jane in common with Mrs. Ogilvie in her Parisian gowns and with her dyed hair, sitting in the vast drawing-room at Bowshott reading the *Court Journal* and thinking on the lines of the speculative philosophers?

And even to Jane Erskine her manner was cold. Her chilling philosophy would soon have quenched a less happy and impulsive nature. No one but Jane would have bothered her head about Mrs. Ogilvie, the kindly neighbours said, envying, nevertheless, the girl's intimacy at the great house. But as a matter of fact Jane expended a wealth of honest affection on Mrs. Ogilvie, and not only thought her the cleverest woman she had ever met, but had even been heard to affirm that her hair was not dyed. She called her 'such a really good sort'; and the words were as inappropriate as the words of Peter Ogilvie and Jane Erskine usually were.

CHAPTER II

Jane Erskine was at the present time at that interesting period when her friends and relatives, having just discovered the unexpected fact that she was grown up, subjected her to mildly severe criticism, while believing that to have reached womanhood at all showed a considerable amount of talent on her part. They were, they said, under no misapprehension about Jane; in moments of extreme candour, touched with responsibility, they had even been known to say that in one or two respects she was not absolutely perfect. Miss Abingdon, for instance, who always conscientiously encouraged these moods, and censured the General for spoiling Jane, would frequently compare her niece with herself, as she remembered that dim figure of girlhood, and never failed to find cause for unfavourable comparison between the two. From the portraits which she drew it was generally believed that Miss Abingdon must have been born rather a strait-laced spinster of thirty, and have increased in wisdom until her hair was touched with grey; when she would seem to have become the mellow, severe, dignified, loving, and critical lady who at this moment was looking out of her drawing-room window, and trying to show her impartiality for her orphan niece by subjecting her to lawful and unbiased criticism.

'The day of the incomprehensible woman is past and gone,' said Miss Abingdon, and she sighed a little.

Jane Erskine was painting a rabbit-hutch on the lawn. Her attitude showed the keen workman, but disguised the woman of grace. Miss Erskine, in fact, was lying full-length on the greensward of her aunt's lawn absorbed in the engrossing occupation of putting the right dabs of green paint upon a portion of the inside of the rabbit-hutch which was awkward to get at.

'They are all alike,' sighed Miss Abingdon. She alluded to the girlhood of the present day as it presented itself to her regretful and disapproving eye. 'They wear shoes two sizes too large for them, they don't require to be taken care of, they buy their own horses, and they are never ill. They call young men by their Christian names! I don't think they even have headaches.' Miss Abingdon sighed again over this lost art of womanhood. 'There is my niece Jane Erskine; she might be a graceful and elegant young woman, whereas she is sunburned, and—it is a dreadful word of course—but I can only call her leggy. Perhaps it is the fault of those narrow skirts. Women have never been so much respected since crinolines went out of fashion. I believe the independence of the modern girl is no longer assumed; it is not even a regrettable passing fashion; the time has come when I am afraid they really are independent. Jane would think me insane if I were to go out and sit with her in the garden when Peter comes to call, and I don't believe she has ever done a piece of fancy-work in her life!' said Miss Abingdon.

She looked round her pretty drawing-room in which, with a spinster's instinct for preserving old family treasures, she had gathered and garnered antique pieces of furniture, ill-drawn family portraits, and chairs covered with the worsted-work and beadwork of fifty or sixty years ago. She looked regretfully at the piano and the old, neatly bound folios of music with 'M. A.' upon the covers, and she wondered how it was that no one cared to hear her 'pieces' now. She went over to the music-stand and fingered them in a contemplative way. How industriously she used to practise 'Woodland Warblings,' 'My Pretty Bird,' 'La Sympathie, Valse Sentimentale pour le Piano,' and 'Quant' è piu bella,' fingered and arranged with variations.

On Sunday afternoons when her guests 'were having a look at the mokes' Miss Abingdon still played through her book of sacred pieces; and it was on Sunday afternoons, too, that she always stirred the jars of potpourri upon the cabinets, so that their pungent, faint odour might exhale through the room. The old pieces of music and the scent of the dried rose-leaves together always brought back to Miss Abingdon's mind fragrant memories of long ago.

'We used to take a roll of music with us when we were asked out to dinner,' she reflected, 'and it was all-important to us who should turn over our leaves for us, and we generally blushed and hesitated before we sat down to the piano at all. Last night Jane almost fought with Peter for the larger portion of the keyboard of the piano; and they played music without any tune in it, to my way of thinking, and there is no seriousness at all about any of them.'

'I wonder if they'—Miss Abingdon again referred to that distressing body of young women of the present day—'I wonder if they have ever kissed a lover's letter, or have slept with his picture underneath their pillows at night? Or have they ever lain sleepless for an hour because of a loved one's absence, or because of a cold word from him? Do they write verses, or exchange valentines, or even give each other flowers?'

Miss Abingdon recalled in her own mind the days when she and her sister used to walk together in the park, with mamma leaning upon papa's arm and pacing sedately behind; and how, when they used to sit down on one of the lawns, it had always been in a group of four. Ah! those were the days when one went home and wept because the dear one—the handsome hero who filled half a girl's thoughts and was the object of more than half her worship—had not seen, one across the crowd; or he had seen, perhaps, but girlish modest eyes were forbidden to give the signal of approach. It was more maidenly then to be oblivious of a young man's presence. 'Now,' said, Miss Abingdon, 'when they see a young man whom they know—a pal I believe they call him—girls will wave their parasols or even shout. I have known them rise from their own chairs and go and speak to a man. The whole thing is extraordinary to me.'

It was a relief to Miss Abingdon's sombre reflections when her friend, the vicar's wife, came in for a morning call. She thought that Mrs. Wrottesley's brown merino dress and bonnet, and constraining mantle which rendered all movements of the arms impossible, looked very decorous and womanly compared with the soles of a pair of brown leather shoes, and the foreshortened figure of five feet eight of slender young womanhood stretched in strenuous devotion to her strange occupation on the lawn.

When Mrs. Wrottesley seated herself opposite the window Miss Abingdon resisted an impulse to pull down the blind.

'Yesterday,' said Miss Abingdon, glancing at her niece, 'she was trying to copy a feat which she had seen at the hippodrome, and was riding one pony and driving another tandem in front of her over some hurdles in the field.'

Mrs. Wrottesley smiled with the rather provoking indulgence with which our friends regard the follies of our relations.

'She is so young,' said Mrs. Wrottesley, 'and she is very beautiful.'

'No,' said Miss Abingdon, with inward pride at her own unwavering impartiality, 'I honestly believe that if we were to consider Jane without prejudice we should find that she is simply healthy.'

'It is a great charm,' said Mrs. Wrottesley.

'No, no,' corrected Miss Abingdon quickly, 'the charm of womanhood consists in its mysteriousness. Now, the girl of to-day is simply a good fellow. She doesn't require to be understood, and she doesn't drive men crazy; she shoves her own bicycle up hills and fights for the larger half of the keyboard of the piano.' She sighed again.

'She is a moral influence,' said Mrs. Wrottesley. Mrs. Wrottesley also alluded to the girl of the period; and Miss Abingdon thought that to refer to her as 'she' or a type, instead of 'they,' had a flavour of culture about it, but she did not mean to give in.

'Yes, yes,' she said impatiently, her love of contradicting Mrs. Wrottesley and at the same time holding her own in the discussion inclining her to undue severity, 'she is as straight as any other good fellow, and she pays up if she has lost at bridge, and would as soon think of picking a pocket as of cheating at croquet; but she is not mysterious—she is absolutely comprehensible.'

'Probably,' said Mrs. Wrottesley, 'Jane's shortcomings in this respect are due to the fact that she is lamentably unaffected. Affectation, in the case of girls who ride straight and don't know what it is to have a headache, very often takes the form of boyishness. Let us console ourselves with the fact that, being perfectly natural, Jane has escaped masculinity.'

'Jane is a lady,' said Miss Abingdon severely, and with the faint suggestion of administering a snub. 'But,' she added, with that touch of superiority in her manner which obtruded itself in most of her conversation with the vicar's wife, 'there are certain accepted traditions of womanhood such as conventionality approves, and it was not called artificial to conform to them when I was a girl.'

'I remember,' said Mrs. Wrottesley, 'that we honestly thought that we were interesting when we ate very little, and I myself often used to aspire to an attractive display of timidity when inwardly I had no sensation of fear.'

As the wife of the vicar of the parish Mrs. Wrottesley wore brown merino and a mantle, but these hid a great soul securely held in check and narrowed down by a strict adherence to the small conventions and paralysing rules which society seems to have prescribed for vicars and their wives in the rural parishes of England. She prayed every morning of her life for more faith, and meant by that a narrower creed. Mrs. Wrottesley was an inarticulate woman, and had gained for herself the character of being reserved.

Her own view of things differed in all essentials from the opinions which were held by those about her, and were even inwardly opposed to theories which her husband, with such gentlemanly eloquence, expounded every Sunday morning. People thought themselves charitable when they merely said that they did not understand Mrs. Wrottesley.

'The modern girl has a good effect upon society,' she continued; 'and she is not a cat.'

'Ah, yes,' allowed Miss Abingdon, conceding a point, but prepared with unanswerable argument; 'but will she ever be loved as the old eternal feminine was loved?'

'Many people believe,' said Mrs. Wrottesley, 'that you can't be a man's divinity and surround yourself with a golden halo, and be his pal at the same time.'

'I remember,' said Miss Abingdon reminiscently, and feeling that she was still scoring heavily against her friend—'I remember we used to come down to breakfast in light gloves to match our gowns, and we drew them on when the meal was over and only removed them in the morning-room when we had taken out our embroidery to work at it.'

'And when embroidery bored us,' said Mrs. Wrottesley, 'we thought we were in love.'

'A Miss Sherard stayed here last summer,' said Miss Abingdon, 'a friend of Jane's, and she smoked cigarettes in her bedroom. I know that, for I saw the ashes in her pin-tray.'

Miss Abingdon rather enjoyed making little excursions through her guest's bedrooms of an afternoon, when she had the house to herself; and, without deigning to touch or disturb anything, she knew pretty well, for instance, whose complexion was real and whose was false, who wore powder and who did not.

Mrs. Wrottesley glanced at her own figure in the drawing-room mirror; her mantle disguised the fact that she had either a waist or a pair of arms, and she gave a little dry smile as she reflected that she had accepted a dolman cloak with all the other outward conventions of orthodoxy as understood by society in rural England.

'My cousin, Peter Ogilvie, comes here every day,' said Miss Abingdon; 'he is crossing the lawn now. In former days these two young people would have been talked about. (Peter is my cousin, you know, on my father's side of the house—he is not related to Jane.) But neither will probably mind in the least what is said about them, and for my own part I am positively unable to say whether they care for each other or not. Had I been Jane I would have sat in the arbour this morning, with a pretty, cool white dress on, reading poetry or some light romance, or working at my embroidery till my lover came, instead of being found covered with paint and with the footman's baize apron on.'

The two ladies moved closer to the window and watched the young man crossing the lawn. He was well-built and not many inches above Jane's own height; and perhaps when one has said that he was fair with that Saxon fairness which suggests an almost immaculate cleanliness, and looked like a gentleman, there is not much more to be stated about his external appearance.

Jane rose from her recumbent position on the turf and shook off some blades of short grass from her apron, and waved a brush filled with green paint in the air.

'Don't touch it, Peter!' she cried. 'Isn't it lovely?'

'Good morning, Jane,' said Peter, lifting his cap. Whatever else might be said of them, it would have to be admitted that there was a fundamental sense of courtesy and good-breeding underlying the regrettably frank manner of these young people. 'If you wave your brush about in that triumphant way you 'll splash me with green paint.'

'I have sacrificed two dresses already,' answered Jane; 'but real Art is worth that!'

'The hutch looks ripping,' said Peter; 'but I should feel safer if you would put down that brush.'

'I couldn't resist painting the inside,' said Jane, surveying her work ecstatically. 'Do you think the rabbits will lick on the paint and be sick, Peter?'

'Probably,' said Peter.

'Of course we don't know,' said Jane gravely, 'that it isn't their favourite food. Rabbits may flourish on green paint just as we flourish on roast mutton.'

'It would be beastly to have a green inside!' said Peter.

'I wonder what they are talking about,' said Miss Abingdon, glancing with an apprehensive eye from the drawing-room window. 'Perhaps, after all, they are making love to each other; and if they are, I certainly ought to go out and sit with them.'

Miss Abingdon had antiquated notions of a chaperon's duties.

'I suppose there would be no objection to the match if they do care for each other,' said Mrs. Wrottesley, in a manner that was often called brusque and had served to make her unpopular. 'Jane is rich–'

'Jane has money,' corrected Miss Abingdon, who saw a well-defined difference between the two statements. 'She is a ward in Chancery, you know, and she will not come of age until she is twenty-five. Peter, of course, has a very large fortune. Still, one would not like to be responsible for a marriage, even if it is suitable, and I should not like the Erskines to think I had not looked after Jane properly.'

That nothing should happen always seemed to Miss Abingdon the height of safety and of peace. She mistrusted events of any kind, and had probably remained single owing to her inability to make up her mind to such a momentous decision as is necessarily involved by matrimony. She had never been out of England, and now could seldom be got to leave home; whenever she quitted her own house something was sure to happen, and Miss Abingdon disapproved of happenings. She believed in the essential respectability of monotony, and loved routine. But alas for routine and respectability and a peaceful and serene existence! Even elderly ladies, who dress in black satin and pay their bills weekly, and whose most stimulating and exciting morning is the one spent in scolding the gardener, may be touched with sorrows for which they are not responsible, and shaken by tragedies such as they never dreamed would come near them.

The young couple on the lawn left the unfinished rabbit-hutch and paint-pots and strolled towards a garden-seat. All the gates and seats on Miss Abingdon's small property were painted white once a year, and their trim spotlessness gave an air of homely opulence to the place. The bench which her young relatives sought was placed beneath a beneficent cedar tree that stretched out long, kindly branches, and looked as though it were wrought of stitch-work in deep blue satin. Jane wiped her fingers upon the baize apron, and Peter lighted a cigarette.

'Have you seen Toffy's new motor-car yet?' he asked.

Had any one demanded of Peter or Jane what they meant by the art of conversation, they would probably have replied that it had something to do with Ollendorf's method.

'How 's Toffy going to afford a motor?' said Jane, with interest. 'Is it going to be "the cheapest thing in the end," like all Toffy's extravagances?'

Finance, one of the forbidden topics of 1850, was discussed to-day with a frankness which Miss Abingdon thought positively indelicate.

'He says he 'll save railway fares,' said Peter, 'and as they are the only thing for which Toffy has paid ready money for years, I suppose there is something to be said for the motor.'

'Is he going to drive it himself?'

'He says so, and the motor is to be run on the strictest lines of economy. I am not sure that he is not going to water the petrol to make it go farther.'

'I don't quite see Toffy steering anything,' said Jane, laughing with great enjoyment at the recollection of Toffy's mad riding; 'he can never take his horse through a gate without scraping his leg against it.'

'So Toffy generally goes over the gates,' said Peter, laughing also; 'and probably he 'll try the same sort of thing with the motor-car.'

'Toffy *is* an ass!' said Jane affectionately.

'I am sure it is time I should go and mount guard,' said Miss Abingdon anxiously, from her post by the window. 'Why should they sit together under the cedar tree like that unless they are making love?' She stepped out on to the lawn with a garden-hat placed above her cap and a sun-umbrella held over her head.

'Aunt Mary,' said Jane, 'Toffy's got a new motor! Isn't it fearfully exciting! We are going for a serpentine run with him, and our next-of-kin are going to divide Peter's and my insurance between them if we never come back again. Be sure you claim all you can get if I depart in pieces!'

Miss Abingdon laughed. She knew she was weak even where she disapproved of her niece. Jane never kept anything from her, and she would tell her aunt ridiculous items of sporting intelligence which were as Greek to that excellent lady, and would talk to her as to any other really good friend. Miss Abingdon was conscious of the charm of this treatment, but the disciplining of youth was important, and Jane required both training and guidance.

'I can't think why,' she said severely, 'you should call a young man Toffy. It is a name I should hardly liked to have called a dog when I was a girl.'

Peter raised his fair eyebrows and looked distressed. 'I don't see what else you could call a man named Christopherson,' he said. 'You couldn't call him Nigel—that's Toffy's front name—and I 'm afraid he hasn't got any other. I believe fathers and mothers think you must be going to die young when they give you a name like that, and that it will look well on a tombstone.'

'You shouldn't joke about death, Peter,' said Miss Abingdon. She felt almost as though she saw an ally approaching when she perceived the Reverend Canon Wrottesley come up the drive to call for his wife on the way to the vicarage. Miss Abingdon had long ago accepted with thankfulness St. Paul's recommendation to use the Church as a final court of appeal.

'How-do-you-do, Peter, how-do-you-do?' said the canon cordially, as Peter went across the lawn to meet him. 'Got leave again, have you? I don't believe you know what hard work is!' The vicar had pottered about a small parish for thirty years and had given his five sons an excellent education on the handsome fortune which his wife had brought him. This helped to convince him that he had borne the burden and heat of the day, and very naturally he regarded idleness as the root of all evil.

'Mrs. Wrottesley is looking over the guild work in the morning-room,' said Miss Abingdon conscientiously. She loved a chat with the vicar, and thought him more genial and charming when his wife was not present. 'Shall I tell her you are here?'

'She likes taking a look at the things the girls have made,' said the canon indulgently.

The Vicar of Culversham and Honorary Canon of Sedgwick-in-the-Marsh was a genial and delightful man. He always spoke kindly of his wife's work, and he could even pardon fussing on the part of a woman. He was a universal favourite and was no doubt aware of the fact, which gave him a very legitimate and wholly pardonable sense of pleasure. It is doubtful if any man was ever more happily placed than was Canon Wrottesley in the considerable village of which he was the esteemed vicar. In a larger place he might have been overlooked, in spite of his many excellent qualities; and in a smaller one he would not have had so many social advantages nor so many opportunities for usefulness. His vicarage was large and well-furnished, his sons were well-grown and well-educated, and he himself had many friends. The part of the country where he found himself was known to house-agents as being a good neighbourhood; and it was not so far away from London that the canon felt himself cut off from the intellectual life of his day. Canon Wrottesley belonged to the London Library and liked to converse on books, even when he had read only a portion of the volumes which he discussed. He often fingered them with true scholarly affection as they lay on his library table, and he discussed erudite points of learning with a light touch which his hearers, in a parish not renowned for its culture, found truly impressive. Even his vanity was of the refined and dignified order of things, and seemed to accord pleasantly with his handsome, clean-shaven, aristocratic features. Perhaps his one weakness was to be the centre of every group which he adorned. And he held this position skilfully, not only by a well-bred display of tact, such as he showed upon all occasions, but by a certain gift which he possessed of appearing in different roles at different times, according to his mood. Still, in spite of a tendency to a self-convincing form of masquerading, one is fain to admit that the village of Culversham would have lacked one of its most pleasing figures had Canon Wrottesley been removed from it. He bore an untarnished name, he had always a pleasant, if pompous greeting for every one, and he preached and lived like a gentleman. He was well-dressed and amiable, and his only display of temper or touchiness took the rather curious form of adopting some impersonation not in accordance with the circumstances in which for the moment he found himself.

Mrs. Wrottesley appeared from the house, still clad in her black mantle which had evidently not been removed while she looked over the guild work, for it bore traces thereof upon it in morsels of cotton and the fluff of unbleached calico.

'Come and sit beside me, love,' said her husband, indicating one of Miss Abingdon's garden-seats in close proximity to his own cushioned chair, 'and I will take care of you.'

Miss Abingdon smiled and looked admiringly at him. Conscience frequently protested against her giving way to the thought, but in her heart Miss Abingdon was convinced that Mrs. Wrottesley was not quite worthy of her husband.

'I think I must go back to the house and finish the guild work,' said Mrs. Wrottesley. 'I have been very slow over it this morning, but I have got a little headache, and I have been counting up everything wrong, which is very stupid of me.'

'How often have I told you not to work when you are tired?' said the canon, shaking his finger reprovingly at her.

'I 'll finish the guild work,' exclaimed Jane, 'and I 'll make Peter come and help me.'

Miss Erskine, who had been sitting upon one of her feet and swinging the other, rose impulsively from the garden-seat and covered the lawn in a series of hops, until her shoe, which had become hopelessly entangled in the laces of her petticoat, released itself with a rending sound. Then she removed her hand from Peter's shoulder, upon which she had been supporting herself, and together they went into the house.

'And this,' thought Miss Abingdon ruefully, 'is courtship as it is understood in the present day!'

CHAPTER III

The following morning Miss Erskine was awakened at the unusual hour of five a.m. by having her window broken by a large pebble. 'I tried small ones first, but it was not a bit of good,' said Peter later, with compunction.

Jane stirred sleepily, and flung her heavy brown hair upon the pillow. This was probably some nonsense on the part of a young Wrottesley, and Jane was not going to be taken in by it.

Next, the point of a fishing-rod was tapped against the pane; it was, therefore, probably that particular Wrottesley boy whose passion for fishing in the early hours of the morning was well known. Jane rubbed the sleep from her drowsy eyes, and called out that she knew quite well who it was, and that Cyprian was to go away at once.

'Jane,' said Peter's voice, 'I wish you would wake up and come down. Toffy's had a horrid smash. He says he 's all right, and he won't go to the doctor, but his hand is badly cut and he has had a nasty knock on his head.'

'Oh, Toffy!' said Jane, 'you 've been in the wars again!' She had descended from her bedroom, and had now unbarred the windows of her own sitting-room and stepped out on to the dewy grass in the clothes which she had hastily put on, her heavy brown hair, tied loosely with a ribbon, falling down her back. The windows of her boudoir were protected by green wooden jalousies and were considered a safeguard against thieves.

'This is awfully kind of you, Jane,' said Toffy. 'I don't think there is really much the matter with me.'

He came inside the sitting-room and Peter made him lie down on the sofa. There was a bruise on one side of his head, and his hand was bound up with a pocket-handkerchief drenched with blood.

'Don't look at it,' said Jane. 'Just stretch out your hand like that, and I 'll bathe it.' She had the simple remedies which Miss Abingdon kept in the house—boracic lint and plaster. Nigel Christopherson lay on the sofa and looked up at the ceiling, because, as Jane had somehow divined, he hated the sight of blood; and he discoursed gravely on his misfortunes while she dressed the ugly wound and bound and slung his hand.

'Talk of sick-nurses!' muttered Peter, and wondered how it was that Jane was able to do everything better than other people could; although, indeed, the bandaging showed more tenderness than skill, and there was something almost pathetically youthful and inconsequent in the manner of both patient and nurse.

The room itself was indicative of the youthful and unlearned character of its owner. A box of chocolates occupied an important position on the writing-table, some envelopes stuffed with dress patterns lay upon a chair. There was a large collection of novels which Jane did not often read, and a much larger collection of illustrated books and papers which she and Peter thoroughly enjoyed. A favourite parrot, who never could be induced to talk, sulked in a cage and had a great deal of affection expended upon him. The remains of the guild work which Mrs. Wrottesley had not finished occupied the greater part of the sofa, and Jane meant to ask her maid to run up all the little blouses and petticoats, as she herself was too frightfully busy to undertake them. An immense number of photographs ornamented the mantelpiece and were mixed up, without attempt at classification, with curious odds and ends which Peter had sent home from South Africa during the war time. Some riding-whips hung on a rack on the wall, side by side with a few strange sketches in oil-colours of Jane's favourite hunters, painted by herself. Peter thought the sketches were among the best he had ever seen, and even Jane was rather pleased with them.

'I 'll take the guild work off the sofa,' she said, 'and that will give you more room.' She settled his head comfortably upon the pillows and turned to Peter for an explanation or an account of the accident.

'I don't know much about it,' said Peter, giving his head a shake. 'The Wrottesley boy and I were going out fishing early, and we found Toffy sitting in the middle of the road with a motor-car hung in a tree.'

'You see,' said Toffy, in his grave, low voice, 'I have made up my mind for some time past to travel by night because it saves hotel bills.'

'But it doesn't cost you much to sleep in your own bed, Toffy,' protested Jane.

'No,' said the young man, looking at her with admiration; 'I hadn't thought of that. I have dismissed my chauffeur,' he went on, 'because he was always wanting things. I said to him, "My good man, get anything you want if you can get tick for it." He was a maniac about ready money. I got on all right for the first forty miles or so after leaving London, and I was going on splendidly when my motor, to gain some private end, went mad. How do these things happen? Thank 'e, Jane,' as Jane fastened a silk handkerchief to serve as a sling for the wounded arm.

'Providentially the thing broke down at the Carstairs's very gates,' he went on. The loss of blood was making him sick, but if he went on talking he would probably not faint. 'And it was then three o'clock in the morning, so I coaxed it up the drive and shoved it into the coach-house, and took their motor, which is rather a nice one.'

'Then it wasn't your own machine that you smashed up?' said Peter.

'No, praise be!' replied Toffy.

'When will the fraud be discovered?' asked Jane. 'Gilbert Carstairs is quite a good sort, but his wife has very little sense of humour.'

'Oh, I left a note all right in the coach-house,' answered Toffy, 'and I pointed out to Gilbert that he had no right to encourage burglaries by having inefficient locks on his coach-house doors. I added that I thought he ought to be very thankful that it was an honest man who had stolen his motor-car.'

'Also, I hope you said that he might have the loan of your disabled one till he had had it thoroughly repaired?' said Peter.

'I said something of that sort,' Toffy replied. 'And I should think Gilbert would do the right thing by the motor. I am only afraid Mrs. Carstairs may misunderstand the whole thing.'

'One is liable to be misunderstood by even the best people,' said Peter.

At breakfast-time it appeared that nothing had been done to prepare Miss Abingdon for the news that one of her best spare bedrooms was at this moment occupied by a man with a broken head, for she appeared at the door of the breakfast-room in a serene frame of mind, and was kissed by Peter, who announced that here he was, you know, and hoped she was not much surprised to see him so early.

'I am never surprised,' said Miss Abingdon, with intention.

'I have been thinking,' said the young man presently, in the peculiarly genial voice which was characteristic of him and helped to make him so likeable, 'that, suppose a policeman should come sniffing about here this morning, you had better tell him that there is no such thing as a motor-car in the place, and that there has never been one.'

'That is hardly true, Peter,' said Miss Abingdon, in the severe manner which she cultivated, 'considering how often Sir Nigel is here with his.'

'As a matter of fact,' said Peter steadily, 'Toffy is here now. He is—he is in bed, in fact.'

'Something has happened!' exclaimed Miss Abingdon apprehensively. Why was it that youth could never be contented without incidents? To be young seemed to involve action, while acquaintanceship with Jane and Peter seemed to bring one, however unwillingly, into a series of events.

'There was a little accident early this morning,' explained Peter. 'Toffy was travelling at night —to save hotel bills, you know—and there was a breakdown because he didn't quite understand the Carstairs's machine, which he had borrowed; so poor Toffy came off second best; but Jane patched him up most beautifully, and Martin said he had better have the blue room.'

'Do I understand that Sir Nigel Christopherson stole Captain Carstairs's motor-car in the middle of the night and left his own damaged one in its place?' said Miss Abingdon, 'and that he regards this matter quite lightly?'

'Toffy is a cheery soul,' said Peter.

'You are all cheery souls!' said Miss Abingdon hopelessly. She summoned the butler and sent for the village doctor, and made Peter telegraph to Captain Carstairs.

'You always seem to think of everything, Cousin Mary,' said Peter admiringly.

'Some one has to,' said Miss Abingdon, with a strong touch of superiority in her manner; and then she walked round the breakfast-table to where her niece was sitting and kissed her, because a few minutes ago she had looked at her severely, and what would happen if Jane were ever to prefer the Erskines' house to hers? What if Jane were to prolong the six months which it had been stipulated she should spend with her father's relations in London? Jane loved General Erskine too well already. Miss Abingdon felt weak as she said, 'Don't worry any more about it, Jane,' for Jane did not look worried. 'And now,' she said, 'I must go and see how Sir Nigel is.'

Miss Abingdon still used a key-basket and hoped, please God, she would never be called upon to give up this womanly appendage, whatever the world might come to. The jingling of the keys was a harmonious accompaniment to her whenever she walked about. She bent her steps now down the cool wide passages of her charming house to visit her disabled guest, who, she heard, was awake. It was part of her creed that sick persons should be visited, whether they themselves desired it or not. In her young days nurses were unknown, and one proved one's Christianity by the length of time one remained in overheated sick-rooms. Still, Miss Abingdon was not accustomed to the presence of a sick man in her house, and she paused on the door-mat before entering the room, and said to herself, 'I feel very awkward.' Then she timidly tapped at the door and went in.

Sir Nigel Christopherson was lying in bed reading the Bible. When he was not getting into debt, or riding races, or playing polo, or loving Mrs. Avory, Toffy generally employed his spare moments in reading the Bible. He was a preternaturally grave young man, with large eyes and long eyelashes of which he was properly ashamed, being inclined to class them in his own mind with such physical disadvantages as red lips or curling hair. Miss Abingdon thought that he was generally misunderstood. It impressed her very favourably to find him employed in reading Holy Scripture, and she turned away her eyes from the book, which Toffy laid frankly on the outside of the counterpane, feeling that the subject was too sacred to comment upon.

'How do you feel?' she said gently. 'You look very white.'

'Oh, I 'm as fit as a fiddle, thanks, Miss Abingdon,' said Toffy.

'You don't look it,' said Miss Abingdon, with a return to her severe manner.

'I 'm really a very strong chap,' said Toffy. He had been delicate ever since he was a little boy. School games had often been an agony to him. He had ridden races and had lain awake all night afterwards, unable, through sheer exhaustion, to sleep; he had played polo under burning suns, and had concealed the fact (as though it had been a crime) that he had fainted in the pavilion afterwards. He very seldom had a good night's sleep, and habitual bad luck or the effort to conceal his constitutional delicacy had given him a curious gravity of manner, combined with a certain gentleness, which contrasted oddly with his whimsically absurd utterances. No one ever looked more wise than this young man, no one ever acted with more conspicuous foolishness, and no one ever received a larger measure of ill-luck than he. If Toffy hunted, his horse fell or went lame. If he rode in a steeplechase, some accident, the condition of the ground, or the position of the jumps, made the course unusually difficult for the particular horse he was riding. Did he play polo, his most brilliant hits just failed to make the goal. His gravity and his gentleness increased in proportion with his ill-luck. No one ever backed Toffy, and no one believed in his best efforts. But they borrowed his horses and his money, and lived for months as his guests at the huge ugly house which was his home; and Toffy accepted it all, and philosophized about it in his grave way, and read his Bible, and loved Mrs. Avory. No

one but Toffy would have loved her; she was quite plain and she was separated from her husband —a truculent gentleman who employed his leisure moments in making his wife miserable. And she had a daughter of ten years old towards whose maintenance Mrs. Avory made blouses and trimmed parasols for which her friends hardly ever paid her.

The world, with its ever-ready explanation of conduct and its facility in finding motives, ascribed Sir Nigel's chronic impecuniosity to the fact that he contributed to the support of Mrs. Avory and her little girl. Mrs. Avory, who knew quite well what was said of her, ate her cold mutton for supper, and economized in coals in the winter, and paid her little weekly bills, and wondered sometimes what was the use of trying to be good when so few people believed in goodness.

Toffy came to see her every Sunday when he was in London; or, if he did not do so, Mrs. Avory wrote him long letters in very indistinct handwriting, and told him that it was all right, and that she really hoped he would marry and be as happy as he deserved to be. And the letters were generally blotted and blistered with tears.

Miss Abingdon put her key-basket upon the dressing-table and sat down in an armchair on the farther side of the room. It upset her very much to see Sir Nigel looking so ill, and she believed that to read the Bible at odd hours was a sign of approaching death.

'You must have some beef-tea at eleven,' Miss Abingdon said, and felt glad that she was able to do something in a crisis.

'I think I was brought up on beef-tea,' said Toffy. He had accepted, with his usual philosophy, the fact that whether you broke your back or your heart a woman's unfailing remedy was a cup of beef-tea.

'And I am sure you would like your own servant,' said Miss Abingdon; 'I suppose you have some one over at Hulworth for whom you could send?'

'My man is an awful thief,' said Toffy, 'which is why I keep him. Otherwise, I don't think there is a single thing he can do, except put studs in my shirts. Hopwood will only steal Peter's things,' he added reassuringly. 'He tells me my things are generally stolen and that I never have anything to wear, and so he borrows all he can from Peter. It is an extraordinary thing,' said Sir Nigel, beginning his sentence with his usual formula—the formula of the profound philosopher who has learned to accept most things as strange and all things as inexplicable—'It is an extraordinary thing the way all your possessions disappear. You try having duplicates, but, you know, Miss Abingdon, that's not a bit of use. The first man who comes along helps himself just because you 've two of a thing, so you 're not a bit better off than you were before, are you?'

The young man turned his blue eyes with their long lashes on Miss Abingdon with a look of mute inquiry, and threw one arm in its striped pyjama suit up on the pillow.

Miss Abingdon told herself that she was an old woman, and suggested, with outward boldness but with inward diffidence, that Sir Nigel required a wife to look after him.

The young man smiled gratefully at her. 'I think so too,' he said simply; 'but then, you see, she won't have me.'

They were all so amazingly frank! Jane's friend, Kitty Sherard, the girl who smoked cigarettes in her bedroom, had actually told a funny story one day about a flirtation of her father's, and had made everybody except Miss Abingdon laugh at it.

'Perhaps,' she said, 'the lady may change her mind.'

'I don't think she will,' said Toffy slowly. 'You see, she's married already.'

Miss Abingdon did not discuss such subjects. She glanced at her key-basket and moved uneasily in her chair.

'I 'm going to revise the marriage service when I 'm in power,' said the gentle, lagging voice from under the heavy canopy of old-fashioned chintz with which Miss Abingdon, who disapproved of draughts, hung all the beds in her house. 'You see, it's like this,' he went on; 'girls, when they are about eighteen or twenty, would generally like to improve on their parents a bit, and to have meals at

different hours to those which they have grown tired of in their own homes; also, they have an idea that if they haven't a romance some time or other they will be rather out of it, don't you know, so they say "yes" to some fellow who proposes to them—you have done it yourself hundreds of times, I dare say, Miss Abingdon—but if you haven't the luck to get out of it, you are jolly well tied for the term of your natural life.'

'There are some very sad cases, of course,' said Miss Abingdon, drawing down her upper lip.

'And it's so often the good ones,' said Toffy, from the depths of his profound experience of life, 'who have the hardest lines. And that makes it all the more unfair, doesn't it?'

Afterwards, when Miss Abingdon used to hear a great deal about Sir Nigel and Mrs. Avory, and when many regrettable things were said concerning two people to whom, at the best of times, life was a little bit difficult, she would seem to see the young man, with his delicate face and his head bound up with white linen, lying on the frilled pillow of the great canopied bed, and the recollection would come back to her of the tones in which he had said, 'It's so often the good ones that have the hardest lines,' and Miss Abingdon never failed in loyalty to Toffy, and believed in him to the very end.

She rose now and bade him good-bye, and then she glanced at the open Bible on the counterpane and decided once more that young people were inexplicable, and she clung to her key-basket with a feeling of security, and, holding it carefully in her hand, went downstairs again.

CHAPTER IV

Jane, meanwhile, had walked over to Bowshott to see Mrs. Ogilvie and to tell her the news of Toffy's motor-car accident, and to explain why Peter was delayed. She came into the drawing-room, with its long mirrors in their gilded frames, its satin couches and heaped-up flowering plants, and huge windows looking on to the scrupulous gardens and park. She walked in the shortest dress that a merciful fashion allows, a loose shirt hung boy-like on her slender figure, and a motor-cap, with the brim well pulled down over her eyes, covered her head. She shook hands and regretted inwardly that Mrs. Ogilvie did not like being kissed, although disclaiming even to herself that her distaste in this respect had anything to do with rouge and powder. She sat down on a low chair by the window with the fearlessness of one whose complexion is not a matter of anxiety, and she told Mrs. Ogilvie the story of the disaster.

'Toffy's so awfully unlucky,' said Jane, with genuine sympathy showing in her eyes and voice; 'and the doctor says his hand will be bad for a week at least.'

'Is there such a thing as bad luck?' said Mrs. Ogilvie, shrugging her shoulders.

'You can't say Toffy gets his deserts!' pleaded Jane. 'He is always in debt, and his horses always come to grief, and there ought to be a syndicate formed to buy up all the shares that Toffy sells, because it is certain to mean that the market is going up. I think he must have been born under an unlucky star.'

'I used to get a lot of amusement from reading the *Iliad* of Homer,' said Mrs. Ogilvie. 'I know you cannot read or write, Jane, so I will tell you about it. It is a tale of men "warring against folk for their women's sake," and hindered often by the unscrupulous gods. Let us win when we can. Fate, without intelligence, orders the things which we do not order for ourselves, and it is very little use, but only a trifle absurd to feel sorry for the opponent who is beaten.'

'I am always sorry for the man who is down,' said Jane.

Mrs. Ogilvie smiled and rang for tea.

'You are one of those who can say, "I am sorry." Now, I am never sorry, and I consider that what is called repentance is the function of an idiot. If I do a thing, I intend to do it. Regret is the most weak-minded of all human emotions.'

'I 'm always regretting things,' said Jane, looking handsome and delightful, and treating even penitence from a fresh, open-air standpoint. 'But then I believe that as often as not I do the wrong thing, which is a great bore at times!'

'Right and wrong,' said Mrs. Ogilvie, with a shrug, 'loving and not loving, believing and not believing—only very young people ever make use of such ridiculous terms. There is only one law, and it is the law of expediency.'

Jane began to laugh, and exclaimed, 'That's quite beyond me! I know I 'm hopelessly stupid; but whenever people begin to talk about whys and wherefores, and if it is any good saying their prayers, and whether love is the real thing or not, I get fogged directly, and I always want to go for a ride or a walk, or to see the horses, or even to descend to the kitchen and make jam, to get rid of the feeling.'

'If you were in the fashion, Jane,' said Mrs. Ogilvie, smiling, 'you would know not only with which portion of grey matter you say your prayers, but you would also be able to show, scientifically, with which ventricle of your heart you love and hate, or whether indeed love and hate are things not of the heart at all but merely a microbial disease. Will you have some tea?'

'Yes, please,' said Jane, 'and several lumps of sugar.'

'I like people,' said Mrs. Ogilvie, 'who still go to church and take sugar in their tea. They are very refreshing.'

'I must go back now,' said Jane presently, 'for I promised not to be long. By the by, we want to keep Peter to dinner. May we? Or will you mind being alone?'

'I am alone say three hundred and thirty nights in the year,' said Mrs. Ogilvie dryly.

'I wish we hadn't asked Peter to stay and amuse Toffy!' said Jane, with compunction. There was a tired white look on Mrs. Ogilvie's face, and an appearance of fatigue in her movements which neither her supreme art of dressing nor the careful manipulation of light in the room wholly concealed.

'Ah, now you are beginning to repent!' said Mrs. Ogilvie. Only her good manners prevented her remark having a sneer in it. 'That will spoil your evening, you foolish child, and it will not make mine more amusing.'

'But I am thinking of you,' said Jane.

'Do not think of me,' said Mrs. Ogilvie, laying her hand for a moment lightly upon the girl's shoulder.

Jane walked down the hillside and stopped at the edge of the wood to see the young pheasants, and then went on again, swinging a crooked walking-stick and singing in a voice clear and sweet, but somewhat out of tune, snatches of songs which she had picked up from Peter, humming the ridiculous words in a sort of unconscious happiness. She walked with a raking grace which became her as wings become a bird or a long swinging stride a racer. The twilit woods held no fears for her: imagination never peopled Jane's world with bogies. The perfect poise of her figure showed a latent energy and physical strength in spite of her slender build, and her clear complexion and abundant brown hair and white, even teeth lent an appearance of something essentially wholesome to a face that at all times looked handsome and well-bred.

She called good night to the lodge-keeper as she passed through the gates and found her way back to the high road, until, by a short-cut down the hill, she reached her aunt's charming gardens, and the wide, low house with its air of repose and comfort, and the long French windows opening on to the quiet, smooth-shaven lawns.

Peter was waiting for her on the doorstep and was endeavouring not to fuss; if only he had known by which path Jane would return he would have liked to go and meet her, and the fact of having missed a walk with her made him impatient. 'I thought you must be lost,' he said; 'what kept you, Jane? Why did you stay so long?'

When Jane Erskine was away people were apt to ask on her return why she had stayed so long. Miss Abingdon and General Erskine, who divided her time between them, were jealous if even a day of their fair share of Jane was deducted by one or the other. There had been times when Miss Abingdon had unscrupulously pleaded illness as a means of keeping the girl a little longer with her, and she would doubtless have continued her deceptions had not General Erskine adopted the plan of faithfully paying himself back all the days that were owed to him by his niece.

'My mother says she is going to give a ball,' announced Peter at dinner.

'When?' said Jane, breathless with interest. 'Peter, we 'll have both houses as full as they can be, and I 'll ask Aunt Mary to stay here, and you shall ask your mother to stay at Bowshott for it.'

'Jane,' said Miss Abingdon, 'you are very absurd, and just at present you are making the most extraordinary grimaces.'

'I got caught in the rain to-day,' said Jane, 'and had to walk with it in my face. I 'm quite sure rain must be a skin-tightener like those things you see in advertisements.'

'It's given you an awfully jolly colour,' said Peter.

'Has it?' said Jane.

Perhaps a compliment had been given and received, Miss Abingdon did not know. Beauty itself was almost at a discount nowadays. Even feminine vanity, so long accepted as the mainspring of feminine action, had lost its force. Pale cheeks were not in vogue, and frankness had superseded sentiment.

'What souvenir would they give each other if they had to part?' thought Miss Abingdon—'a terrier dog, or a gun, or a walking-stick, most likely!' Faded flowers were quite out of the fashion, and old letters no longer had the scent of dried rose leaves about them. Was perfect healthiness ever

very interesting, and must sentiment always be connected with an embroidery frame, a narrow chest, and round shoulders?

Jane obliterated the *menu* from the porcelain tablet in front of her by rubbing it with a damask table-napkin, and, having moistened a pencil, she began to write a list of names of those people who were to be asked to stay for the dance. 'Kitty Sherard certainly,' she said, and put the name down on the tablet.

'She 's some one's niece, isn't she?' said Peter.

'She 's every one's niece, I think,' replied Jane.

'Rather rough luck on Miss Sherard,' said Peter.

'It's a fact, though,' Jane went on. 'Really and truly, Aunt Mary, each of her relations married about ten times, and then the next generation married each other. And they send problems to the puzzle column of newspapers to find out how they are related to each other. Kitty's father is his own great-grandmother, or something complicated of that sort!'

'It must give one an immense respect for oneself,' said Peter, 'to discover such a relationship. One would always be taking care of oneself, and not allowing one's feet to get wet, and thinking what one owed to one's position, and whether one were being treated with respect.'

'There are fillets of beef coming, and ducks,' interpolated Miss Abingdon. 'I let you know this, Peter, as Jane seems to have erased our only *menu*. What will Sir Nigel have, do you think?' she went on. 'I don't think he is at all well; he was reading his Bible in bed, and I 'm not sure that we ought not to send for some of his people.'

'Poor Toffy never had any people,' said Peter. 'They were all just as unlucky as he is, and most of them died violent deaths when they were young; and one of them, I know, founded some sort of queer religion, so perhaps Toffy takes after him in his Biblical researches.'

At this moment Sir Nigel Christopherson walked into the room looking as white as any ghost.

'Toffy, you lunatic!' said Peter, 'why can't you lie still?'

Sir Nigel apologized for being late and declined to have anything brought back for him.

'How are the Amalekites and Hittites and Girgashites?' said Peter, making room for his friend at the table.

'I don't like the Bible joked about,' said Miss Abingdon severely.

'Toffy should have been a parson,' said Peter; 'even at Eton he was always wondering why Cain was afraid that all men should kill him when he had only a father and mother and perhaps two or three little brothers and sisters in the world. And he used to fret himself into a fever wondering if the sun really stood still in Ajalon and what Selah meant in the Psalms.'

'I think,' said Miss Abingdon, 'that such discussions are best left for Sundays.'

'We will go on with our dance-list,' said Jane; 'Mrs. Wrottesley can let us have several rooms at the vicarage, or, if the worst comes to the worst, we might have tents in the garden.'

'The canon is always so good-natured!' said Miss Abingdon, who believed that a man's house belonged to himself, and whose mind always reverted with a sense of peaceful orthodoxy to thoughts of the vicar. She decided mentally that he must not be asked to receive any of the guests for the Bowshott ball, believing that visitors must always be more or less disturbing to a host. She accepted as part of her gentle creed that a man's writing-table must never be disturbed, that his dinner must never be kept waiting, and that his special armchair must not be appropriated by any one else. Canon Wrottesley always read the morning paper before any other person in the house had seen it, and then imparted pieces of intelligence to his relations with a certain air of self-congratulation, as though conveying news which could only possibly be known to himself; and it was in this way that Miss Abingdon loved to have the items of interest retailed to her with instructive comments upon politics.

CHAPTER V

Mrs. Wrottesley had a theory, which she never asked nor expected any one to share with her, that most men's mental development ceased at the age of twelve years. She had watched five sons grow up with, in their young boyhood, the hardly concealed conviction that each one of them was destined to be a genius, and that each one would make his mark in the world. But her sons, as they attained to the fatal age of twelve years, seemed predestined to disappoint their mother's hopes. Most of the men whom she knew, and whom her sons brought to the house, were delightful boys, whatever their ages might be. She liked them, but she wished sometimes that it were possible to meet a man with a mature mind. The male interest, she determined, after giving much study to the subject, centred almost too exclusively round playing with a ball. She had heard men extolled as grand cricketers and magnificent putters with an enthusiasm which could hardly have been greater if they had saved their country or had died for a cause. And she admitted to herself that the mind of a woman was deficient when she failed to do justice to these performances.

Her reflections on these and kindred subjects this morning had been induced by hearing of the determination of Canon Wrottesley to light the rubbish-heap in the garden. The rubbish-heap had grown high and Canon Wrottesley had determined to put a match to it. Mrs. Wrottesley had been married too long not to know that whatever at the moment engaged her husband's mind required an audience. Her sons also had expected her to watch and applaud them did they in infancy so much as jump a small ditch, and she knew that it was the maternal duty, and admitted, also, that it was the maternal pleasure to watch and applaud until such time as the several wives of her five sons should take her place.

The whole of the vicarage household was in requisition as soon as their reverend master had conceived the happy notion of firing the canonical rubbish-heap in the far corner of the kitchen garden. Canon Wrottesley engaged the attention of every one with a frank belief in his own powers as an organiser. He found himself almost regretting that he could not make the matter an occasion for a little gathering of friends. He loved society, especially ladies' society, and he purposely kept various small objects about his own room, which—to use his own expression—might make a little bit of fun. There was a mask half concealed behind a screen, which, if it did not provoke a start and a scream from some fair visitor, had attention drawn to it by the playful question, 'Who is that behind you?' There was a funny pair of spectacles on the mantelshelf, which Canon Wrottesley would playfully place upon his handsome nose, and to small visitors he would accompany the action by a frolicsome 'wowf-wowf.' He loved juvenile parties when he could wear a coloured paper cap on his head or tie a paper apron round his waist, and probably his canonry had come to him through what he himself called his social gifts rather than by his reputation as a minister of religion. Perhaps he was at his best at a christening party; he had won much affection from his parishioners by his felicitous remarks upon these occasions. When the gravity of the christening of the infant was over Canon Wrottesley always deliberately relaxed. He chaffed the proud father, told the mother that the baby was the finest in the parish, and wanted to know whose health he was to drink where every one appeared so blooming.

'Now, mamma,' the canon said busily, 'let us have plenty of nice dry wood to start the blaze, and then you must come down to the field and watch us put a match to the pile. Cyprian, my boy, where are the old newspapers kept? Fetch them, like a good son, and then you shall carry a little camp-stool down for mamma to sit upon. Now my coat,'—this to his butler—'and, Cyprian, tell Mary to find papa's old gloves.'

Mrs. Wrottesley left her morning's work to go to the meadow, and Canon Wrottesley looked down the road once or twice to see if by a happy chance some friend or neighbour might be passing to whom he could proclaim his boyish jaunt. The 'Well I never, sir,' even of a rural parishioner did in some sort minister to his vanity. An audience was a necessity to him. He regretted that his

cloth forbade him to indulge in private theatricals, but he encouraged Shakespearean readings and often 'dressed up to please the children.' Sometimes of an evening he would perform upon the piano, indulging in a series of broken chords which he called improvisation, and upon these occasions he felt that he was a kind and thoughtful master when he set the drawing-room door open so that the servants might hear; and as his servants thought so too it was all eminently satisfactory.

This morning, the beauty of the weather having inspired him to the part of a schoolboy, he avoided a gate and leaped a small fence into the meadow, and he waged boyish fun upon grave-faced Cyprian, who longed to be fishing. He greeted his two gardeners with an air of holiday, and, having waved his stick to them, he called out some hearty remarks about the weather.

Alas! when the corner of the meadow was reached it was found that the rubbish-heap had already been fired, and nothing of it was left but the smouldering ashes. The canon wondered why people could not leave things alone, and was inclined to blame mamma. She surely might have known how much he enjoyed this sort of thing, and have asked the gardeners to leave it to him.

His boyishness, however, could hardly be repressed this morning; and, speaking to his fourteen-year-old son as though his age might be five or six summers, he clapped him on the back and bade him 'Never mind; we will go for a merry jaunt to the ruins instead, and have a regular big affair, and you shall boil a kettle, and we 'll have tea.—What do you say, mamma?' Mrs. Wrottesley replied with the enthusiasm that was expected of her, and the canon, with a 'here we are, and here we go' sort of jollity, conducted her indoors to write notes of invitation to friends to join the picnic. The canon dictated the notes himself, and generally finished with a playful word or two suitable to each recipient; when he failed at first to hit off the perfectly happy phrase Mrs. Wrottesley had to write the note over again.

Foiled of his morning's occupation the canon walked up to Bowshott himself with Mrs. Ogilvie's card of invitation. Mrs. Ogilvie frankly and without a moment's hesitation refused to be one of the party; a picnic was in her eyes one of those barbarous, not to say indecorous things which she classed with bathing in the open sea or trying on a hat in a shop. Why should one sit on the ground and eat indifferent food out of one's lap? Mrs. Ogilvie was too sorry, but it was impossible; she had friends coming, or letters to write, or something—at any rate she was quite sure she was engaged. Mrs. Ogilvie's manner always became doubly polite and charming when she ignored the customary formalities of society or purposely travestied them. No one could infringe social conventions with more perfect good manners. Peter would go, of course, she said. Peter enjoyed eating luncheon in snatches while he hopped about and waited on people; but Mrs. Ogilvie preferred her meals at home.

The canon was disappointed; he loved getting the right people together, and he knew that Mrs. Ogilvie's rare appearance in the neighbourhood always made her a centre of interest at a party. He protested playfully against her decision until a certain lifting of Mrs. Ogilvie's eyebrows made his desire for her presence sound importunate, and put an end to his hospitable pleadings.

'A charming woman,' protested the canon to himself as he walked down the long avenue of Spanish chestnuts. 'A charming woman,' he repeated, for one part of Canon Wrottesley always felt snubbed when he had been talking to Mrs. Ogilvie, while the part of him called the man of the world recognized something in her which this country neighbourhood could not produce. His boyishness was quenched for a moment, but it revived at the sight of Peter riding up to the gates of the park. An invitation to the proposed merry-making was given to Peter, who was ever so much obliged, but thought Canon Wrottesley had forgotten that the 24th was the day of the races.

The Sedgwick Races, although perhaps not important from a sportsman's point of view, were attended by many visitors, and had been so long established and so generally approved by every one in the county that they had come to have a certain local status. They were patronized by clergy and laity alike, to whom the occasion was a sort of yearly picnic. The racecourse itself was not large, but its surroundings were in every way attractive. The short moorland grass made excellent going for the horses, and a wood of beech trees, quite close to the modest grand stand, had by right of

prescription been tacitly assigned to various county families who brought their lunches and teas there, and whose long trestle tables, numbered and allotted by the stewards of the course, were a favourite meeting-place for the whole neighbourhood. Canon Wrottesley could hardly pardon himself for having forgotten the date of such a notable occasion, and, alluding to himself as a 'winged messenger,' he hastened to pay a number of morning calls such as he enjoyed, and to cancel his invitation for a picnic in favour of lunch or tea at the racecourse. Peter said that he was going to drive the coach over, and hoped that Canon Wrottesley would perch there when he felt so disposed, and that his mother, not being inclined to spend the whole day at Sedgwick, would join them at tea-time. Miss Abingdon and Jane were going to be kind enough to take her place and act as hostesses at lunch.

Canon Wrottesley felt that he could not do better than see Miss Abingdon in person and explain the change of plans, and he arrived, in his friendly way, just as she and some guests who were staying with her were going in to luncheon.

Miss Abingdon occasionally reminded herself that she had not met the vicar until long after his marriage, and she still more frequently assured herself that her feeling for him was one of pure admiration untouched by sentiment such as would have been foolish at her age, and at any age would have been wrong. But there were times like the present—when the canon came in, unasked, in a friendly way, and hung up his clerical hat in the hall—which, without going so far as to give the matter a personal bearing, made it easy for Miss Abingdon to understand why women married. She ordered another place to be laid, and asked him to say grace almost with a feeling of proprietorship; and she ordered up the particular brand of claret which the canon had more than once assured her would be all the better for being drunk.

Jane came in presently from her morning ride, handsome and charming in a dark habit and a bowler hat; and Toffy appeared looking white and thin, and protesting that he was perfectly well; and Kitty Sherard came in late, as usual, and hoped that something had been kept hot for her.

Kitty Sherard was a decorative young woman, with a face like one of Greuze's pictures and a passion for wearing rose-colour. Her father was that rather famous personage, Lord Sherard, one of the last of the dandies, and probably one of the few men in England in the present day who had fought a duel. He was still thought irresistible by women, and perhaps the only sincere love of his life was that for his daughter Kitty, to whom he told his most *risqué* stories, and whom he found better company than any one else in the world.

Miss Sherard was in a wilful mood this morning—a mood which, let it be said at once, was one to which she was often subject, but it had been more than usually apparent in her for the last few days. She began by hoping, in the politest way, after she had sat about five minutes at the luncheon-table, that Miss Abingdon did not mind the window being opened, although it was a well-known fact that Miss Abingdon held the old-fashioned theory that only the furniture should enjoy fresh air, and that windows should be opened when rooms were unoccupied. So many people rose to do Miss Sherard's bidding that Miss Abingdon, of course, found it quite hopeless to try to assert herself. Kitty, further, had a ridiculous way of eating, which Miss Abingdon could not approve. She ate mere morsels of everything and talked the whole time, very often with the air of a gourmet; and she would lay down her knife and fork, after a meal such as a healthy blackbird might have enjoyed, as though she had finished some aldermanic feast. She accepted a glass of Miss Abingdon's very special claret and never even touched it; and later, in one of the pauses of her elaborate trifling at luncheon, she told a funny story which made every one laugh, and caused even Canon Wrottesley to attempt to conceal the fact that he saw the point of the story.

The worst of it was that Toffy encouraged her in everything she said and did. These two had met in London this year, and had stayed at the same house for Ascot, and it must be admitted by a faithful historian that in her own particular wilful and provoking way Kitty had flirted outrageously with Toffy. To-day she offered to cut up his food for him because his right hand was still in a sling; and when Miss Abingdon suggested, with deliberate emphasis in her voice, that a footman should

do it for him, Kitty pretended that the wounded man could not possibly feed himself, and gave him pineapple to eat on the end of her fork.

When she sat in the veranda drinking coffee after lunch, she showed Canon Wrottesley how to blow wedding-rings with the smoke of her own favourite cigarettes; and she talked to him as though his early youth might have been spent in a racing stable, and with the air of one expert to another.

'I hear,' said Canon Wrottesley, when Miss Sherard had begun to play a left-handed game of croquet with the crippled young man, 'that Sir Nigel is going to ride at the Sedgwick Races. I was a fearless horseman myself at one time, so I cannot quarrel with him for his decision, but I only hope that his hand will be healed by the 24th.'

'He has a good mount,' said Peter, 'and I don't think it is much good trying to persuade Toffy not to ride.'

'Kitty Sherard says she has laid the whole of her fortune on him,' said Jane, 'so let 's hope that will bring him luck.'

'I believe,' said the canon, in a manner distinctly beatific towards the subject of his remarks, 'that I enjoy that little race-meeting at Sedgwick as much as anything in the year. We must all have our little outings once in a way.'

There is no doubt that the canon took his little outings, as often as he could get them, with a healthy, boyish pleasure.

On the day of the races, for reasons no doubt known to himself but hidden from the rest of the world, the vicar masqueraded in the character of a patriarch. His characters were frequently inconsistent with his circumstances; often his boyishness would obtrude itself quite unexpectedly at board meetings or on the parish council, while at other times the mantle of the seer or prophet descended upon him on the most inauspicious occasions. Had Mrs. Wrottesley spoken her mind, which she never did, she might have thrown light upon the subject, but she was not a convincing woman at the best of times. All her life she had kept inviolate the woman's secret whether or not her husband was a disappointment to her. No one knew from his wife if the little god of a somewhat small and feminine community had feet of clay or no.

Arrived at the very delightful beech wood which formed a pleasant place of encampment for tea-parties, Canon Wrottesley could only smile absently at the picnic-baskets, and appear wrapped in thought when addressed; he might have been mentally preparing his next Sunday's sermon. Miss Abingdon thought that he was doing so and respected him for it; she even tried to attune her mind to his, and endeavoured to see vanity of vanities in this informal gathering of friends.

'We do not think enough of serious things,' she said.

The inhabitants of Sedgwick put on sporting airs and curiously cut overcoats on two days in each year. The weather for the occasion is nearly always cloudless, and the townsfolk have begun to think that either they are very clever in arranging the date of their local function, or that the clerk of the weather is deeply interested in Sedgwick Races.

On this particular day the sun flickered as usual through the clean leaves and boughs of the beech wood, doing its best to lend an air of picturesqueness to lobster salads and aspics, and shone brilliantly on servants, with their coats off, unpacking hampers at rows of long tables, and on people busily engaged in the inartistic business of eating.

In the paddock there was an unusual number of horses being led round and round in a ring, and some well-known bookies—not often seen at the little provincial meeting—were present with their raucous cries and their money-bags.

Kitty Sherard carried a pair of field-glasses on a long strap, and consulted from time to time a little gold-bound pocket-book in which she added up figures with a business-like air. She believed in Ormiston, which Sir Nigel Christopherson was riding, and she had something on Lamplighter as well. She knew every bookmaker on the course by sight, and had as much knowledge of the field as any one in the ring. And she looked exactly like some very beautiful child, and carried a parasol

of rose-coloured chiffon beneath which her complexion and eyes appeared to great advantage. She smiled whether winning or losing, and ate a tiny luncheon with an epicurean air.

At four o'clock in the afternoon it is an accepted custom at Sedgwick Races for every one to have tea before the last event, and then horses are put to in coaches and carriages, and those who have attended the meeting whether for business or pleasure drive back to their own homes, or go slowly downhill in a long string to the little railway station where, for two days at least in the year, the local station-master is a person of importance.

Mrs. Ogilvie arrived at the racecourse, as she had promised to do, about tea-time. She hardly ever cared to watch the races; but she stood amongst her friends for a while in the pleasant shade of the wood, and looked on at the little gathering with that air of detached and hardly concealed weariness which she always felt on such occasions. She congratulated Peter, who had won a rather closely finished race earlier in the day; but her voice betrayed little interest in the event, and an onlooker might have been surprised at the almost distant way in which she spoke to him. She was sumptuously dressed, as usual, and wore her clothes with extravagant carelessness. She found herself at tea-time sitting next Canon Wrottesley, whose patriarchal mood seemed to her unnecessarily affected, and she requested him to ask Miss Sherard to come and speak to her. 'Kitty amuses me,' she said, with one of her characteristic shrugs, 'and most people are so dull, are they not?'

Canon Wrottesley felt that mixed sensation which association with Mrs. Ogilvie always gave him—a feeling of resentment combined with a desire to please. He rather hastily let the mantle of the seer drop from him, and said, 'I wish our little party were not so much dispersed. Mr. Lawrence from Frisby brought two charming friends with him, and they much hoped to have been here to meet you. Falconer is their name—Sir John and Lady Falconer. He has just been made Minister at Buenos Ayres, as I dare say you know, and he told me they once had the pleasure of meeting you in Spain, years and years ago.'

'I never remember people whom I have met years and years ago,' said Mrs. Ogilvie. Her near-sighted eyes, with their trick of contracting slightly when she looked fixedly at anything, narrowed as she spoke, and the heavy lids closed lazily upon them.

Lady Falconer, meanwhile, had arrived at the tea-table and greeted Mrs. Ogilvie with evident pleasure. 'I am afraid you will hardly remember me, as it is a very long time since we met,' she said; 'but my husband and I always remember how good you were to me when I was ill at Juarez.'

Mrs. Ogilvie rose and shook hands with a cordiality that was charmingly expressed. Her eyes were no longer half-closed, and her colour never varied. 'You were ill, were you not?' she said, in a manner that was a little vague but polite and sympathetic.

'Yes,' said Sir John, 'and you let your maid come and nurse her. My wife always said she would have died if it had not been for you.'

'The climate was abominable,' said Mrs. Ogilvie; 'every one felt ill there. Why does one go to these out-of-the-way places?'

'It is very absurd,' said Lady Falconer, in a friendly way, 'to be surprised at people growing up; yet I can hardly realize that Captain Ogilvie, whom we met to-day, is the little boy who was with you at Juarez. How time flies!'

'It more often crawls, I think,' said Mrs. Ogilvie, smiling, with her mouth a little twisted to one side. And then she rose to go because she never stayed long at any party, and not even the fact that Nigel Christopherson was going to ride in the last race altered her decision. At parting she was too glad to have met Lady Falconer, trusted that if ever she cared to see a collection of tiresome pictures she would come to Bowshott, and hoped that if the gardens would be of any interest to her she would drive over some afternoon when it was not too hot, and have tea with her—any afternoon would do. Had Mrs. Ogilvie been giving an invitation to tea in a barn it is probable that her manner would have been as distant, as casual, and as superb as when she suggested, with a queer sort of diffidence, that people might care to see the famous galleries and gardens of her magnificent house.

'How very interesting,' said Canon Wrottesley to Lady Falconer when the carriage had driven away, 'your meeting like this!' The vicar's acquaintance was not extensive, and that people should re-encounter each other or have mutual friends always struck him in the light of a strange coincidence.

'She has not altered much,' said Sir John Falconer, 'and yet it must be many years since we met: I suppose she never was good-looking. Somehow one seems unaware of it when one is speaking to her.'

'I could do nothing but look at her dress,' said Lady Falconer good-naturedly. 'How is it that everything she wears seems to be in such perfect taste?'

'Mrs. Ogilvie is a rich woman,' said Canon Wrottesley, enjoying a proprietary way of talking of his neighbour, 'and she is able to gratify her love of beautiful raiment. I do not understand these things myself,' he went on, with a masculine air, 'but the ladies tell me that her dresses are all that they should be.'

'I don't know what we should have done without her at Juarez,' said Lady Falconer, in her peculiarly kind manner. 'Sir John and I were on our honeymoon, and, like many other newly married people, we wanted to be alone.'

'Dudley, the artist, told us about Juarez, I remember,' interpolated Sir John, 'otherwise I do not suppose we should ever have heard of the place. Dudley had been sketching there.'

'I had not a maid with me,' went on Lady Falconer, in her pleasant voice, 'and Mrs. Ogilvie in the kindest way allowed a Spanish woman she had with her to do everything for me.'

'Mrs. Ogilvie is always devoted to everything Spanish,' said Mrs. Wrottesley. 'Her mother was Spanish, and I dare say you know she made her home in Spain for six years after the eldest boy's death.'

'I did not even know that she had lost a son,' said Lady Falconer. 'How very sad!'

The crowds of gaily-dressed people about them, the shouts of the bookmakers, and the pleasant sense of being on an enjoyable picnic contrasted oddly with any reference to such banished topics as death and sorrow.

'I consider that Mrs. Ogilvie is one of the most reserved women I ever met,' said the canon, proceeding to give an epitome of a character which he thought he—and perhaps only he—understood. 'She is impulsive yet cautious, clever yet light-minded; for a woman her intelligence is quite above the ordinary run, and yet she is often hopelessly difficult to convince.' He leaned forward on the table looking handsome and dignified, and his clean-shaven face had an appearance more clever than was quite justified by his attainments.

'I am sure that Mrs. Ogilvie is a woman of deep affections,' said Lady Falconer, whose tongue seemed framed for nothing but kind speeches.

'I remember,' said Sir John, 'how struck my wife and I were, that year we met her in Spain, by her devotion to her son. It seemed to us to have almost a touch of tragedy in it; but that, of course, is now explained by hearing that she had just lost her only other child.'

'Poor Mrs. Ogilvie!' said Mrs. Wrottesley.

The words seemed incongruous. Mrs. Ogilvie, with her contempt for pity, her sumptuous manner of living and of dressing, was hardly an object for compassion; and Canon Wrottesley felt that his wife's commiseration was out of place, although he was far too kind to say so in public.

There was a lull suddenly in the noise of the race-course; the bookmakers' harsh shouts ceased, and even conversation stopped for a moment, for the last race had begun.

The last race was an interesting event. It was a steeplechase for gentleman riders only, and friends of the riders were standing up, with field-glasses to their eyes, watching with absorbed attention the horses, which were still a great distance off on the other side of the course. Jane was standing by Peter. Kitty Sherard was quite near; she was not looking through field-glasses as the others were doing, but stood leaning lightly on the balcony of the stand with her two hands clasped on the wooden rail in front of her.

'Can you see who is leading?' said Jane, and received no answer to her question, and then she saw that Miss Sherard was not looking at the racecourse at all. Her face was white, and her hands, which were clasped on the wooden rail before her, had a strained look about them, and showed patches of white where the slender fingers were tightly pressed on the delicate skin.

The last race involved some big fences, it is true; but then Kitty of all people in the world was the last to be afraid of a stiff course. It was not like her to keep her eyes turned away from the horses until some one quite close to her said, 'Well, they 're over the water-jump anyway,' when she suddenly raised her field-glasses, with hands that were trembling a little, and kept her eyes fixed on the race. It was going to be a close finish, most people thought, and as the horses came round the farther corner you could, as the saying goes, have spread a tablecloth over them. Toffy's horse closely hugged the rails and was kept well in hand; while, of the two in front of him, one was showing signs of the pace and the other had not much running left in him. These two soon tailed off, when the favourite (dark green and yellow hoops) came through the other horses and rode neck to neck with Toffy's. It became a race between these two, and it was evident that the finish was going to be a close one.

'Toffy's not fit to ride,' said the voice of a young man who would have liked Toffy to win the race, although he knew better than to back him. 'He is as mad as ten hatters to have ridden to-day.'

'His weight is right enough,' said another manly voice, with a laugh; 'it's extraordinary how a man of his height can ride so light. Christopherson 's a regular bag of bones.'

'I wish to goodness they wouldn't talk!' said Kitty suddenly under her breath.

The two horses came on neck to neck to the last fence but one.

'By gad, he knows how to ride!' went on the masculine voice, 'but Spinach-and-Eggs is on the better horse of the two.'

The ground was in splendid going condition and the two horses raced over it. They could see Christopherson's face now, and Toffy was smiling slightly, while the other man's teeth were firmly set. Their two stirrups clanged together as their horses rose to the rails and galloped on to the last fence.

And there, of course, Toffy's horse fell. It was not his fault; there was a bit of soft ground just where he landed, his horse blundered and fell, and the favourite rode past the winning-post, an easy winner.

The spectators in the grand stand could see Christopherson pick himself up a moment later and lead his horse home; but there was one moment, when the rider behind him took the last jump, in which for a fraction of time it seemed more than possible that he might land on the top of Sir Nigel. For a breathless space there was that dramatic silence which may be felt when a concourse of people literally hold their breath. Miss Abingdon covered her face for a moment, and Jane heard Peter say 'Good God!'

The next moment the danger was over, and Jane was surreptitiously handing Miss Sherard a handkerchief drenched in eau-de-Cologne, for Kitty had sat down suddenly and her face was white. She did not speak, but she looked up into Jane's face for a moment, and the look said as plainly as possible, 'I can't help it—don't tell any one.'

'It was a horribly near thing,' Jane said, in order to explain Kitty's pallor to herself, 'and I 'm afraid it has given you rather a turn.'

Miss Sherard's feeling of faintness was only momentary, and already the bright colour was in her cheeks again and she laughed and said, 'It was not the jump, really, Jane; but I am a horrible gambler, and I put my very last shilling on Toffy.'

CHAPTER VI

Mrs. Ogilvie's ball, according to an old-established custom, followed closely on the race. The proximity of the two events had helped to gain for the quiet countryside the reputation of a gay neighbourhood. Country houses were filled with visitors, and the ballroom and the famous picture-gallery at Bowshott received an even larger number of guests than usual. There was something impressive in the great space and width of the ballroom, with its polished floor. The palm-houses had been emptied to form an avenue of green up the middle of the picture-gallery, at whose extreme end an altarpiece, representing a scene from the Book of Revelation, showed a company of the heavenly host as a background to a buffet-table crowded with refreshments. The constant movements and the brilliant lights provided a fitting air of gaiety to the scene. It was Mrs. Ogilvie's whim to have her rooms illuminated in a manner as nearly as possible to represent the effect of tempered sunlight. 'No woman cares to see,' she used to say, 'she wants to be seen.' And so the lights at Bowshott were always arranged in such a way that the beauty of women should be enhanced by them. Plain faces softened under the warm glow which had no hard shadows in it, and beautiful faces were lighted up in a manner that was almost extravagantly becoming.

'It is only on such an occasion as this,' said Miss Abingdon, 'that one really seems to think that Bowshott is put to its proper use.'

She was talking to a young man who called old furniture delicious and Spanish brocade sweetly pretty. 'The modern Englishman,' said Mr. Lawrence, 'was made to live in barracks or in a stable. Probably he is only in his right place when he is on a horse. Could any one but he live at Bowshott and dress in shabby shooting clothes, and smoke cigarettes in a room where Charles I. made love, and wear hobnailed boots to go up and down a grand staircase?'

Miss Abingdon sat on a convenient large couch, where a chaperon might close her eyes for a moment towards the end of a long evening without being accused of drowsiness. She was the recipient of many wise nods and hints and questions.

'How well they look together!' said a lady, as Peter Ogilvie and Jane came down the line of palms, and she left a blank at the end of her speech, to be filled in, if possible, by Miss Abingdon.

'Jane makes Peter look rather short,' said another.

'She should have chosen some one taller.'

'I suppose it really will be settled some day,' said Mr. Lawrence.

'They went for a ride this morning,' said Miss Abingdon dryly, 'and they were positively disappointed because Sir Nigel Christopherson could not go with them. I do not profess to understand love-affairs of the present day.'

Mr. Lawrence was a portly, red-faced young man, with a high-pitched voice. He throve on scandal, and gossiped like a housekeeper. Miss Abingdon liked and thoroughly approved him; his views were sound, his opinions orthodox, and he always took her in to supper at any dance where they met.

Mr. Lawrence's manner towards elderly ladies was a mixture of deference and familiarity which never failed to give satisfaction; he could even discuss Miss Abingdon's relatives with her without offence, and he gave advice on domestic matters. People in want of a cook or of a good housemaid generally wrote to Mr. Lawrence to ask if he knew of any one suitable for the post, and he recommended houses and health-resorts, and knew to a fraction what every one's income was. He was a useful member of society in a neighbourhood like that of Culversham, and was considered an interesting caller. It was his ambition to be first with every piece of intelligence, and he enjoyed telling news, even of a harassing description. Mr. Lawrence believed that Miss Abingdon's niece was already engaged to Peter Ogilvie, and he began by a series of deft questions to try to abstract the definite information that he required from her.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.